

# NARCISSISM AND SUPEREGO DEVELOPMENT

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**M**ANY CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS ABOUT narcissism and narcissistic disturbances focus chiefly on the importance of pathogenic environmental influences during early childhood. Consequently, the role of the superego and its precursors in these disturbances and in the regulation of self-esteem has been relatively neglected. We therefore propose to review Freud's and more current concepts of narcissism as they are relevant to the superego, and to examine the early steps in superego development, including pertinent gender differences. In presenting a developmental framework for the superego, we shall highlight the ways in which emerging psychic structure interacts with and influences the perception of the environment and is influenced by it, and emphasize the relevance of these early steps to later disturbances in self-esteem regulation. Our focus will be on the links between early superego development and particular aspects of narcissism. We shall remark briefly on certain current theories in which these connections seem lacking or insufficient.

## *Narcissism*

In Freud's (1914) first investigation of narcissism, he anticipated structural concepts and implied that both inter- and intrasys-

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temic conflict were intimately related to the loss of infantile omnipotence and to early narcissistic vulnerability. He noted that as the child becomes aware of others' admonitions and develops self-criticism (p. 94), his "original narcissism" (p. 92), derived from "the primitive feeling of omnipotence" (p. 98), becomes eroded. Freud proposed that later self-regard depended on the "residue of infantile narcissism," narcissistic sustenance from object relations, and from the fulfillment of the ego ideal (p. 100). By creating and fulfilling the ego ideal, the individual is enabled to recover and "substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood" (p. 94). He considered that problems in relating to objects, such as autoerotism with no apparent attachment to external objects, making a narcissistic object choice, or becoming extremely dependent on external objects for a sense of well-being can result from severe constraints imposed by the ego ideal (p. 100-101), and he saw the "narcissistic neuroses" as corresponding to a conflict between the ego and the superego (1923a, p. 152). Freud pointed out that what appears to be a conflict with an external object may be the result of an externalization of a conflict involving the superego, but as a consequence of defenses against painful feelings of inferiority and guilt, the role of the superego may be obscured (1933, p. 65-66). Freud was also aware that superego severity was not in proportion to actual parental behavior, but rather in proportion to the individual's hostility (e.g., 1923b, p. 54; 1930, pp. 125-26, 138; 1933, pp. 62, 109).

### *The Views of Kohut*

"Self psychology" has evolved from efforts to explain the origins and dynamics of narcissistic personality disorders (Kohut, 1971; Ornstein, 1978). However, progressively less emphasis has been placed on psychic structure and inner conflict as conceived of by Freud. Instead, the supraordinate self, viewed as a structure which is thought to exist at or soon after birth (Ornstein, 1978, p. 102), is affected when there is inadequate "mirroring" and

empathic responsiveness on the part of the mother. Consequently, the infant fails to idealize this "selfobject" and thus the formation of the ego ideal is interfered with or precluded. While the ego ideal is not defined, its impairment or absence is thought to result in a failure of internal regulation of self-esteem and in a dependence on external objects for a sense of wholeness. In contrast to Freud's view, Kohut sees the critical and punishing features of the superego as residues of real experiences with parental authority (Kohut and Seitz, 1963, pp. 366-367). Kohut similarly views superego approval as direct replacement for parental approval and solely dependent on the original parents' capacity to be loving and approving.

### *The Views of Kernberg*

Kernberg maintains that a narcissistic disturbance indicates pathological internalized object relations which result in a pathological self-structure. A preponderance of aggression leads either to a regression to, or (partially) arrested development in, Stage three of his five postulated developmental stages (Kernberg, 1976, p. 55-83). The resultant splitting and pathological inflation of the self-representation make an impossible task for the emerging superego which, beginning at Stage four, must integrate the ego ideal, the sadistically distorted parental images, and realistic perceptions of parental commands. Loving aspects of the superego do not develop; rather the superego retains a primitive, aggressive, and easily projected quality derived from intense oral-aggressive fixations. These patients maintain "the image of a hungry, enraged, empty self, full of impotent anger at being frustrated, and fearful of a world which seems as hateful and revengeful as the patient himself" (1975, p. 233). Kernberg notes, however, that it is uncertain whether this development is caused by a constitutionally determined strong aggressive drive, by a lack of anxiety tolerance in regard to aggressive impulses, or by severe frustration in the earliest years of life (p. 234).

### *The Views of Ego Psychologists*

The concept of narcissism, self-esteem regulation, and the superego have been explored separately and together. There is general agreement that the superego is a system of specialized functions (self-observation, censorship, signaling of painful affect, instigation of defense; self-judgement leading either to approval and reward or to reproach and self-punishment), utilizing specific mental representations, i.e., those which have assumed the qualities of introjects,<sup>1</sup> or of ideals. The collection of ideals constitutes the ego ideal, an integral part of the superego; it contains representations of the ideal object, the ideal child or person (moral and behavioral codes derived from the parents' superego), and the ideal self (Beres, 1958; Fenichel, 1945, p. 105; Freud, 1914, 1933; Hartmann, 1950; Hartmann and Loewenstein, 1962; Muslin, 1979; Pulver, 1970; Ritvo and Solnit, 1960; Sandler, 1960a; Sandler and Rosenblatt, 1962; Sandler et al., 1963; Schafer, 1960).

According to ego psychologists, narcissism and self-esteem regulation are best understood in terms of complex affective and ideational states closely linked to drive vicissitudes, to object relations, and to superego functioning. Jacobson (1954) proposed that fluctuations in self-esteem are proportionate to the degree of congruence or discrepancy between the self-representation and the wishful concept of the self (ego ideal). The qualities of the ideal (predominantly archaic, or more mature and realistic) are seen to play a crucial role in whether such harmony may be attained (Reich, 1953, 1954, 1960), although intrasystemic superego conflict makes self-esteem regulation particularly difficult (Rangell, 1963). Extending Jacobson's notion, Joffe and Sandler (1965, 1967) suggest that the varieties of affective pain associated with narcissistic disturbances result from "deviations from an *ideal state* of well-being" (Joffe and

<sup>1</sup> "Introjection" here refers specifically to the internalization of authority (Sandler 1960a); thus "introjects" refers to those specific mental representations that accrue authority and maintain behavioral directives and that eventually function in the place of external objects.

Sandler, 1965, p. 397). Others (Pulver, 1970; Muslin, 1979) suggest that such painful affects can serve as a signal for defense, a concept that bridges the gap between the structural theory and earlier formulations of narcissism.

### *Discussion*

While Kohut and Kernberg differ in their emphases on aggression, their views have several points in common. They both conceptualize narcissism chiefly in prestructural terms as the libidinal investment of the "self," they both assert that the seat of narcissistic pathology resides in a faulty self-structure, and they both propose the etiology of the fault primarily to be noxious or inadequate experiences with the mother, though Kernberg does allow for the possibility of constitutional and other factors. These formulations, we feel, place undue emphasis on the consequences of presumed real events in early childhood; underestimate the centrality of the oedipus complex (Schwartz, 1978); take inadequate account of the role of the superego and its early development in self-esteem regulation; understate the contributions of later developmental phases to personality development; underestimate the active participation of the child in his own development; and underestimate the influence of a wide spectrum of affects and feeling states on the perception of reality, an aspect of experience which in turn influences psychic structure formation in all phases of development. In accepting the pathogenicity and deficiency view as the major explanation of narcissistic disturbance, Kohut appears to be in danger of repeating Freud's painful error in accepting his patients' accounts of childhood experiences (Freud, 1897). Freud did not repeat this error with regard to the punishing aspects of the superego. He did not accept that superego stringency causing low self-esteem was a direct result of a harsh and unempathetic or unloving parent. Instead, he clarified the intrapsychic factors that lead to the discrepancy between a realistic version of the parents and a punishing conscience (1923b, p.

54; 1933, pp. 65-66). A so-called "pseudonarcissistic" disturbance may result from particular difficulties in superego development, but psychoanalytic data can demonstrate the conflictual origin (Tyson and Tyson, 1982).

Kernberg's developmental formulations, on the other hand, allow for distortions in superego formation in the way Freud earlier suggested (and which Kohut's formulations do not). Yet in our view they overestimate aggressive components and underestimate the role of repressed libidinal elements, the caring and loving experiences with mother, and the role of these experiences in motivating the formation and normal functioning of the superego. Furthermore, we feel that his formulations overestimate the influence of very early developmental stages and underestimate the influence of later experiences, particularly the Oedipus complex. Indeed, Kernberg (1976, p. 41) specifies that the earliest superego forerunners result from fusion of "*guilt-determined ideal objects*" (defined as "previously feared, dangerous, frustrating objects"). Thus he proposes that guilt exists early, and prior to superego formation. He also sees guilt as the basis for the formation of the ego ideal, since this structure results in his view from the fusion of ideal objects with the *ideal self* "representing the striving for the reparation of guilt. . . ." (p. 40). We feel that there are difficulties in a theory in which superego formation is a consequence of guilt rather than vice versa.<sup>2</sup> Although Kernberg has helpfully illuminated some possible etiological factors in narcissistic disturbances, the role attributed to the superego in these disturbances is understated and the superego is seen more as a casualty of earlier psychopathology than as instrumental in later disturbances.

<sup>2</sup> It is true that Freud referred to two origins of the sense of guilt, one from fear of external authority, and one "from fear of the super-ego" (1930, p. 126, 136). But Freud was very careful to distinguish between inner and outer sources of painful affect; he commented that the first affect does not deserve the name conscience, "for at this stage the sense of guilt is clearly only a fear of loss of love, 'social' anxiety. In small children it can never be anything else. . . ." (p. 125). The custom of psychoanalytic usage holds that guilt feelings develop ". . . not out of conflict with the external world . . . but with the internal world" (Nunberg, 1955, p. 159; see also Fenichel, 1945, p. 105; Beres, 1958, pp. 342-343; and Sandler, 1960a, pp. 152-153).

Because of the complexity of the superego and of narcissistic disturbances, ego psychologists have tended to focus either on the understanding of narcissistic psychopathology or on the metapsychological formulations of the superego. However, a unifying, internally consistent developmental framework which encompasses the many "silent" steps by which superego functions and resulting constituents are built up has been lacking. Therefore, the relation between environmental influences, superego structuralization, and the gradual abrogation of infantile omnipotence remains unclear. Such a framework is necessary for fullest appreciation of how superego structuralization allows redemption for lost narcissism in the crystallization of an ego ideal which makes its contributions to the child's optimal and internally regulated sense of self-esteem.

### *Development of the Superego*

We turn now to a tentative, schematic developmental line of superego formation, emphasizing prelatency years. Melanie Klein (1958) postulated an archaic superego in the third to sixth month of life; Freud maintained that the superego emerges in the course of efforts to resolve painful oedipal conflicts (1923b, pp. 34-37); and Hartmann and Loewenstein (1962) felt that not until this internalized structure could maintain the standards of conscience and serve to criticize and punish could one speak of superego autonomy, thus placing it in latency or later.

While not agreeing with Klein, we must consider preoedipal and early oedipal components of the superego *in statu nascendi*. The history of the superego is a long one, as Freud implied (1923b, p. 31). Its gradual evolution is profoundly influenced by concurrent drive activity, ego functions and emerging object relations; through the synthesizing function of the ego (Nunberg, 1931), the primitive multinuclear superego structure (Glover, 1943) is eventually unified. The following discussion of this process is divided for convenience into (1) earliest forerunners; (2) formation of introjects and ideals; (3)

anal rapprochement phase; (4) hazards of the anal rapprochement phase; (5) compliance with the introject; (6) phallic and oedipal phases and superego structuralization; (7) identification with the introject; (8) superego autonomy; (9) gender differences; and (10) later steps in superego development.

### *Earliest Forerunners*

The infant's earliest experiences with the mother make important contributions to the superego-to-be. "Things heard" (Freud, 1923b, p. 52), the soothing experience of being rocked, the evolving recognition of the mother's loving, angry, indifferent or depressed facial expressions in her mirroring role (Winnicott, 1967; Spitz, 1958; Peto, 1967; Riess, 1978), or the mother's interference with thumb-sucking (a "physiological precursor" of a prohibitive superego [van Dam, unpublished]), all leave affective imprints on gradually emerging and differentiating self- and object representations, later to be reflected in the qualities of the introjects and ideals.

### *Formation of Introjects and Ideals*

In the process of forming mental representations, certain object representations become gradually invested with authority, gaining the status of introjects; the self-representation carries a representation of the expected role of the self in relation to that authority (Sandler, 1960a, 1981). The qualities of introjects are very different from simple replications of the external object (Jones, 1947, pp. 148-149), since they also embody the child's projections which exaggerate and distort prohibiting and threatening aspects of the parents. The qualities of the early mother-child relationship, the child's reactions to restriction and frustration, and the child's capacity to tolerate anxiety and frustration combine to determine the qualities of the introjects. Where there is tension, distress, anxiety, or frustration, or when the infant's tolerance of frustration is low, the child's perception



of the parent becomes distorted, lending harsh and cruel aspects to the coalescing introject.

Ego-ideal formation parallels that of the introject. Early wishful images of an ideal state of the self are based on early experiences of safety, pleasure, and comfort within the mother-child dyad, forming the bedrock of the *ideal self-representation*. The child's enjoyment of felt omnipotence in the practicing phase lends an additional active pleasurable component to the ideal self-representation. Parents whom the child normally views as wonderful, omnipotent, and perfect at this time, add to the ideal self-representation and provide the basis of the *ideal object* representation. Parental directives and admonitions lend substance to the child's view of what his parents consider to be a model child. This *ideal child* representation forms alongside rudimentary ideal object and ideal self-representations, and together they constitute the ego ideal.

### *Anal-Rapprochement Phase and Compliance with the Object*

The child's maturation provides a widening scope for narcissistic gratification through increasing individuality and autonomy (Mahler et al., 1975). The toddler becomes aware simultaneously of his pleasure in individuality and autonomy, and of his dependence on the continued love and approval of his ideally viewed mother for the maintenance of his sense of self-esteem, well-being, and safety. Yet, mother's love increasingly has conditions. The child begins to experience inner conflict between his wish for mother's love and other wishes which risk the loss of that love (a form of developmental conflict [Nagera, 1966]). Such conflict indicates the growing presence of the introject evidenced when the child, in a kind of early imitation and role play, says "No, no," to himself, slaps his hand, or shows other identifications with the prohibiting parent such as gestures, inflections, and facial expressions as preliminary phases in superego development (Spitz, 1957; Malmquist, 1968). Thus the child's experience of frustration may originate

in either or both the object's nonfulfillment of the child's wishes and the child's abstinence in efforts to resolve inner conflict while keeping mother's love.

It becomes evident that seeing the parents as ideal is ordinarily a part of the child's learning to cope with his impulses, to delay gratification, and to build frustration tolerance; these inner controls are built up<sup>1</sup> utilizing both ideals and introjects and represent a crucial accomplishment of the rapprochement phase, one which contributes to the development of constant relationships (Burgner and Edgcumbe, 1972) and libidinal object constancy.

Compliance with parents' demands was labelled "sphincter morality" by Ferenczi (1925), originally to refer to compliance in the control of excretory functions. This term has acquired a pejorative connotation, referring to compliance with the demands of an object seen as ideal without reference to internal standards in order to gain love, recognition, or power. However, "sphincter morality," or compliance with the wishes of the object, does indicate a certain level of structure formation and can thus be designated as the third step in superego development.

Striving for approval of ideal parents serves as a prototype for the later need for approval of the ego ideal. Several authors have recognized the importance of the mother's empathy and consistency during this phase for eventual superego development (Ritvo and Solnit, 1960; Winnicott, 1960; Furer, 1967). If the mother can empathically adapt her demands to the child's capacities and not acquiesce once demands are made, conformity, rather than being felt as frustrating or humiliating, can be experienced as mother's and child's shared pride in successful impulse control. Mother can then be experienced as a stable, comforting, and loving authority figure, and the child, by identification with her nonpunitive control, gains confidence in his impulse control while building frustration tolerance. This contributes to the formation of a superego which will be nurturing and protective (Schafer, 1960).

In the course of rapprochement crisis resolution, the growth of both introjects and ideals can be inferred from the child's greater capacity to tolerate ambivalent feelings towards objects, and to comply with the wishes of the object. As greater representational abilities facilitate elaboration of thought and fantasy, the governing influence of the introject and the efforts to achieve the standards of the inner ideal extend progressively more to times of the parents' absence. Of course at this early stage superego functions are not stable or organized, and the external object is needed to insure compliance. However, with growing stability and elaboration of introjects and ideals, the functions of self-observation, self-judgement, and self-punishment or reward begin to operate. When the child fails to meet introject demands or ideal expectations, punishment by a lowering of self-esteem follows. Sensitive intervention may be necessary to counterbalance excessively high introject and ideal expectations and to modify the ensuing punishment.

### *Hazards of the Anal-Rapprochement Phase*

Healthy superego development may be jeopardized during rapprochement turbulence by disturbances in parent-child reciprocity which interfere with the child's normal view of parents as ideal. These disturbances may result from a child's particular vulnerability or low frustration tolerance, by a parent's inability to empathize sufficiently with the child's needs or capacities leading to excessively frustrating or harsh demands, or by a parent's inability to be consistent, thereby eroding the child's sense of safety. Insufficient, defensively excessive, or prematurely lost parental idealization (Hartmann and Loewenstein, 1962, p. 61) may compromise the child's sense of self-worth and accomplishment. Under such circumstances the compliant child, rather than gaining self-esteem from feeling mother's approval and pride in accommodation to her wishes, may feel he has lost omnipotence and fear he has surrendered autonomy when he conforms. His efforts to retain or regain the earlier,

now idealized blissful state may then lead to a pathological persistence of (or a later defensive regression to) early forms of self-aggrandizement. Such aggrandizement may later result in narcissistic object choices (Reich, 1960) and interfere with the individual's maintenance of self-esteem in that he remains vulnerable to a depressive response; when the "grand" view of himself is not sufficiently maintained, he will feel injured, inferior, and enraged.

Excessive gratification, inconsistency, or the parents' failure to set limits (possibly because of the mother's view of her child as ideal and her fear that setting limits will end their idyllic relationship) may be as detrimental as excessive frustration. Establishment of inner controls is delayed and unrealistic expectations of gratification from excessively idealized parental images persist. When the parents eventually do set limits, they are seen as frustrating and lacking in empathy, for they no longer measure up to the early idealized gratifying image. The pathological persistence of such parental idealization in efforts to maintain the illusion of total need satisfaction then interferes with the establishment of mature object relations, for the frustrating parents of the present are persistently denigrated as they fail to live up to the early idealized version.

In addition to disturbances of parental idealization, rapprochement turbulence may interfere with the building up of an inner sense of self-worth. When a mother's standards are excessively high, or when she is overly critical and disapproving, or when a child's libidinal or destructive impulses are particularly difficult for him to control, the child feels in danger of losing his mother's love and approval. He may then develop precocious and hypertrophied reaction formations (Jacobson, 1964, pp. 96-100), and whenever drive derivatives find expression, feelings of disgust and shame are turned against the self, leading to an early loss of self-regard. As one little girl, age two years, eight months, said after a regressive wetting, "I don't like me."

Various intensities of compliance may be utilized as well

as reaction formations in order to retain mother's love, as the child attempts to be "good," overvaluing and idealizing parental standards. Compliance with the wishes of the object is then used to defend against drives (or projections; Jacobson, 1964, p. 98), sometimes to the extent of loss of autonomy or passive surrender of spontaneity. Coinciding as this phase does with early character formation, compliance may then become a part of the person's habitual mode of relating. Later, when the demands of the introject replace parental demands, conformity to the introject may lead to inhibition of independent expression and creativity.<sup>3</sup> Such a person becomes characteristically self-critical, develops unreachable ego-ideal standards, relies on external objects for approval to counteract the disapproving, devaluing introject (Reich, 1960, p. 219), and uses conformity as a defense against (projected) criticisms of external objects in efforts to maintain narcissistic balance.<sup>4</sup>

The formation of perfectionistic, critical introjects also interferes with interpersonal relations. The demands of the introjects become incorporated into ideal object representations which lead a person first to idealize and then critically to devalue others when they do not live up to ideal standards. Consequently, the person is continually disappointed in others and in himself.

<sup>3</sup> Certain precocious children are particularly vulnerable to this problem. The "good" but inhibited latency child frequently has a history of precocious development, with an early sensitivity to parental pride and approval in a way which tends to develop demanding introjects. Subsequently, when such children cannot maintain their rapid rate of development, they become fearful of internal and of external disapproval, inhibit their creativity, and often fall behind in school.

<sup>4</sup> This defensive use of conformity provides an alternative to an explanation offered by Kohut; he hypothesizes a deficiency in a structured "self" when the external object continues to be experienced and to function as a "selfobject" (1977). In our view, the person projects the disapproving introject; the recipient of the projection is feared to be disapproving and yet is felt to be the source of self-esteem. The individual now seeks to please in order to avoid criticism and assure approval. This reflects not a defective "self-structure," but rather compliance as a defense against projected early introjects.

### *Compliance With the Introject*

Following compliance with the object, the next step in superego development is compliance with the introject. This step is a gradual one and may be difficult to distinguish from compliance with the object on the basis of manifest behavior. Only later, when the child is obedient to the mother's wishes in her absence, is the attainment of this step more apparent. Compliance with the introject functions also to safeguard object and self-constancy as it insures the object's pleasurable responses, reinforcing or "refueling" the representation of the loving mother, and the "loveable" self-image (R. L. Tyson, 1983). However, we must emphasize that neither the presence of the introject (Weissman, 1954, p. 539), nor compliance or later identification with it should be confused with the ultimate, integrated, autonomous, structuralized superego system (see Freud, 1930, p. 136).

### *Phallic and Oedipal Phases and Superego Structuralization*

As genital ascendancy overshadows anal interests, the preoedipal ideals of omnipotence and control gradually become superseded (though not entirely replaced) by ideals associated with phallic and oedipal concerns. Seeing the parents as ideal and magically sharing in their omnipotence and power gradually yields to idealization of their masculine or feminine attributes.<sup>5</sup> Ongoing bisexual conflicts stimulate wishes to identify with and yet simultaneously to be the sexual object to each parent. However, if each parent has a different set of expectations, the child may be caught in a bind, pleasing one parent at the expense of displeasing the other.<sup>6</sup> Also, regression to

<sup>5</sup> Lack of parental responsiveness or the child's excessive demands at this stage may lead to the child's inability to fully value and take pride in his gender characteristics, leading to potential problems in gender identity and further sources of narcissistic vulnerability (P. Tyson, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> As one particularly articulate man of thirty complained, "My mother was afraid I'd become a man, my father was afraid I'd become a gelding—I could never please them both!"

earlier ideals and gratifications conflicts with oedipal ideals. The stage is now set for intrasystemic superego conflict, a further source of narcissistic vulnerability as the various parental expectations become embodied in introjects, and as phase-appropriate and parent-specific ideals find their place within the ego ideal.

Inner turmoil increases because of conflicting wishes and attitudes toward each parent—conflict between the child's impulses and his wish for his parents' love, and conflict between his drives and his increasingly elaborate inner set of standards. Self-esteem is jeopardized as the punitive self-judging functions are quick to punish infringement of introject demands or failure to achieve ideal standards; yet inner controls remain weak in comparison to drive impulses. Parents' love is often sought and needed to balance inner criticism.

Fears of loss of love take on new dimensions in this phase. Unfulfilled oedipal wishes are frequently experienced by children of both sexes as rejection, narcissistic injury, and humiliation. In addition, the boy fears castration in retaliation for his positive oedipal wishes, a threat reinforced by narcissistic issues. Castration looms as an impediment to masculine ideals and threatens loss of love from his ideally viewed father. The girl fears the narcissistic threat of an unresponsive father, but also fears the mother's retaliatory envy, hostility, and withdrawal of her continuing love and anaclitic support. The child's efforts to overcome fears of loss of love, fears of castration and, to him alarming, sexual and aggressive tendencies towards his parents find assistance in his parallel tendency to idealize them. Freud (1933, p. 64) noted that the child characteristically sees his oedipal parents as "something quite magnificent," even though an observer may judge them as inadequate or "bad." By increased identification with the ideal, the child of either sex can protect himself from the dangers the oedipal situation threatens. At the same time, the child has an increasing awareness that the parent not only enforces standards of behavior, but lives by a set of moral and ethical codes, an awareness aided by

cognitive maturation. Now the child begins to idealize the parents' moral standards (Hartmann, Kris, and Loewenstein, 1946) and to construct his own internal morality in identification with the idealized moral code of the parents.

*Identification with the Introject and with the Ego Ideal*

Barring insurmountable intrapsychic conflict, partial oedipal resolution and repression is finally aided by the child's increasing (but never total) identification with his ego ideal, and with his own moral codes the strictness of which is in proportion to the strength of his sexual and aggressive drives. The self-approval gained from adherence to these ideals and codes begins to outweigh the presumed value of the wished-for pleasure and gratification from external sources, and the "voice of conscience" becomes experienced as part of a distinctly separate inner institution. A further developmental step is thus taken when *identification with the introject and with the ego ideal* begins. Conflicts lessen as this identification proceeds, since the wishes of the introject and standards of the ideal become the wishes and characteristics of the self-representation; in the absence of regression or significant intrasystemic conflict, behavior eventually becomes automatic in accordance with these standards and with the demands of the introject, and may even be referred to as "second nature."

Progressively more successful identification with the demands of the introject and with the standards of the ego ideal suggests that the various superego precursors or nuclei have come together. We can conclude that the newly emergent superego, although unstable and subject to externalization, can now be considered a coherent functional unit of the mental apparatus. The child begins to fear more the loss of love from his superego than from his parents; this punishment is experienced simultaneously and in differing proportions as a loss of self-esteem and the painful affect of guilt, the "hallmark" of the superego (Beres, 1958). The sense of guilt may be conscious,



or it may be manifest in conscious derivatives of an active, unconscious defensive process (Pulver, 1974), e.g., in the form of self-punishment, or additional feelings of inferiority or loss of self-esteem. In seeking expiation, love, and approval from his own superego, the child strives to identify further with the demands and ideals embodied in it. Consequently, he becomes less dependent on external sources to insure his compliance and to provide sources of self-esteem.

### *Superego Autonomy*

As identification with internal structures proceeds, the progressively more coherent superego functions not only to punish and criticize, but also to maintain the standards of the conscience and of the ego ideal, and to reward with a more consistent feeling of well-being. We can now speak of an increasingly *autonomous superego*, a term implying that the child has growing independence from external objects, from the drives, and from pressures caused by early archaic introjects (Hartmann and Loewenstein, 1962; Jacobson, 1964).<sup>7</sup>

Although the child's superego foundations are laid early in life, clearly it is the challenge of the Oedipus complex that provides the impetus for the integration of superego constituents and functions into a stabilized and structuralized system. Such an achievement presupposes that a certain level of psychosexual development, ego maturation, object relations, and cognitive functioning has been reached. These advances combine to render the child capable of more elaborate perception and reality testing, or logical and progressively more abstract thinking, and of critical judgement and discrimination (cf. Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). As Jones (1926, p. 304) pointed out

<sup>7</sup> Continued pressure from early introjects suggests incomplete oedipal resolution, and that the "voices" of these early introjects are used for several purposes, among which is the defensive warding off of drives. However, continued pressure from early introjects also implies a continued inability to attain a sufficiently close approach to an ideal state of the self, hence continuing narcissistic vulnerability.

“... the concept of the super-ego is a nodal point where we may expect all the obscure problems of Oedipus complex and narcissism on the one hand, and hate and sadism on the other, to meet.”

### *Gender Differences*

Although the female superego is nowadays thought not to be inferior to that of the male as Freud (1925, pp. 257-258) implied, there are some differences, particularly in the regulation of self-esteem and in what is held to be ideal (Muslin, 1979). Several studies (e.g., Blum, 1976; Galenson and Roiphe, 1971, 1976; Jacobson, 1937, 1964; Stoller, 1976; P. Tyson, 1982) suggest that ego-ideal formation, based on identification with the same-sex parent viewed as ideal, begins earlier for the girl than for the boy. The girl's ego ideal harbors in its core the idealized state of the early closeness of the mother-child unit. This early feminine and maternal ego ideal serves a guiding role in the establishment of gender identity and in later positive oedipal development. The girl's reaction to her discovery of anatomical differences may compound any rapprochement difficulties, particularly if she feels narcissistically injured, angry, and disappointed with her mother in conjunction with the discovery (Jacobson, 1954). A precocious disillusionment and deidealization of the mother may follow, along with an accompanying self-devaluation. As a result, hostile introjects form and may be identified with. Alternatively, a compliant and masochistic (Blum, 1976) attitude to external authority may arise in order to avoid loss of love, the fear of which is compounded by projection of the hostile introject and by continuing self-criticism and self-denigration. An early ideal self-representation then centers on a compliant role relationship. The girl's ultimate establishment of a superego relatively autonomous from the drives and from hostile precursors and external objects may depend on the extent to which the father can extricate the girl from rapprochement struggles, offer her an alternative source

of admiration, encourage her to identify with her feminine and maternal ego ideal, and provide her with a responsive, positive oedipal object.

Since it is the mother who first sets standards and demands, the question arises regarding the origin of aspects of the father in the male's superego. One explanation may lie in the way in which the conflicts of the Oedipus complex are resolved. As the father is viewed by the boy as ideal long before entering the oedipal phase (Freud, 1921), ambivalence to the father arising from conflicting incestuous wishes tends to result in additions to his position of authority in the child's mind. The father introject then becomes the spokesman, so to speak, of all previous values and superego precursors, and preoedipal hostile feelings about mother's demands frequently become directed toward the father. Mother is then free to serve as a less ambivalently loved libidinal object. The resolution of the boy's oedipal ambivalence toward the father is contributed to by idealization of the father. Finally, the narcissistic gratification gained by identifying with the ideal and idealized figure of the father helps to balance the boy's narcissistic hurt from his oedipal failure.

### *Later Steps*

While the early stages of superego development have been our main focus, certainly there are crucial contributions from later phases. Further elaboration, modification, and consolidation take place throughout latency. The rigid, noncompromising standards and ideals of early latency are frequently not upheld; it is not until well into latency that we see the superego functioning in a more autonomous manner, relatively free from the pressures of introjects and drives, and from the need for parental or adult support (Hammerman, 1965). However, the imbalance between the judging and controlling functions and the vulnerability of superego control to outside influence remains a potential problem throughout life.

In adolescence, significant alterations must be made in moral codes and standards to accommodate the increased intensity of instinctual urges; these alterations enable the adolescent to experience object-directed instinctual strivings without undue inhibition and restriction, while at the same time maintaining incest taboos. Modifications, revisions, and additions are also made to the ego ideal during the "second individuation" (Blos, 1967), which eventuates in the revision of attitudes toward the parents and the adolescent himself. Parents begin to be "deidealized" and consequently forgiven for not matching the earliest idealizations, and selective identifications are made with more realistically viewed parents. Standards of achievement for the ideal self are also modified and elaborated; new possibilities are seen with new figures for identification, and these are brought into line with realistic talents and opportunities.

These necessary steps in later superego development add to the spectrum of possible explanations for common clinical phenomena in adulthood. For example, a constellation often seen is the persistence of low self-esteem, of intense striving for impossible goals, and of denigration of infantile objects for their failure to meet ideal standards. Among the usual considerations (e.g., persistence of early conflicts and modes of relating, regression to earlier conflicts and functioning, and the effects of actual early environmental failures), we suggest the clinician consider the possibility of insufficient achievement of phase-appropriate superego tasks anywhere along its line of development.

### *Summary*

To elucidate the role of the superego in the maintenance of narcissistic equilibrium, we reviewed Freud's ideas about narcissism and the superego as well as the relevant theories of Kohut, Kernberg, and certain ego psychologists. These latter authors offer an alternative mode of understanding narcissism more consistent with Freud's structural theory, one in which

signal affects and superego functioning play a central role in normal development and in the pathogenesis of narcissistic disturbances. Early steps in superego formation were then examined schematically to elucidate the interaction of environmental influences and emerging psychic structure. We suggested that the first step in a developmental line toward superego formation is based on the affective qualities experienced in the course of self-object differentiation. Subsequent steps examined were introject and ego-ideal formation; compliance with the object; compliance with the introject; identification with the introject and the ego ideal; and finally, with oedipal resolution, the integration of superego nuclei into a progressively structuralized autonomous superego system. This system achieves growing independence from the drives and from pressures from early introjects during the course of latency, and functions to maintain the demands of the conscience and the standards of the ego ideal; rewards or punishments result when these demands and standards are or are not met. The final stage briefly considered here was the revision, modification, and elaboration of moral codes and the ego ideal as part of the adolescent process. Narcissistic vulnerabilities at various stages were pointed out in an attempt to stress that a particular clinical picture in later phases of development or adulthood may derive from any of several developmental points of origin and from one or more etiological factors.

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